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ICM Reflections – Music and Hospitality



My visits to SEC congregations have been more limited since my last reflection piece in the December e-news, but what I have experienced has been a stirring mix of special music and gracious hospitality. Conference Ministers regularly visit different congregations, and over my years the music and hospitality in different conferences has varied greatly. I've experienced the discomfort of music played too slowly or choirs singing off key, and I do appreciate the offerings of all volunteers. But while I'm not even a sophisticated music listener, I do notice when the music fails to be uplifting. And I've visited more than one congregation over the years that claims it welcomes all visitors, and then not a single person offers even a perfunctory greeting. It is so easy to be friendly and welcoming with people we know, and

it takes intentionality for a congregation to learn to be truly welcoming to first time visitors. I'm pleased to proclaim that my experiences here in SECUCC have been marked by great sounds – both by the musicians adding to the worship experience and by the words of members offering genuine words of welcome!

So what was I able to experience during the Advent Season? On the third Sunday of Advent at Virginia-Highland Church the music ministry led by the new Director of Music and the Arts Jamie Shiell, offered All Creation Sings of Christmas. This musical offering featured traditional Christmas favorites, chant, gospel, new-age, and classical music. The Virginia-Highland choir was joined by Atlanta soprano Jeanne

Brown and members of the Morehouse Glee Club, and the chamber orchestra featured musicians from the Atlanta Philharmonic Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. A highlight of the musical offering was the Atlanta premiere of Daniel Solberg's orchestration for strings, winds and harp of The Dream Isaiah Saw. And all of this wonderful music was accompanied by tasteful, artistic, relevant power point images on several large screens...and a thoughtful brief sermon by Sr. Pastor Michael Piazza, who along with co-pastor Cameron Trimble and many members greeted newcomers warmly.

The following Sunday Karen and I journeyed westward and stopped first for the morning worship at Pilgrim Church UCC in Birmingham. Friendly folk and inviting art pieces welcomed visitors and we were treated to a musical medley on this Fourth Sunday of Advent by Pilgrim's director of music Tim Tipton. The selections featured piano, organ, guitar and percussion, with solo instrumental selections and hymn singing followed by instrumental arrangements. We left refreshed for the long drive ahead to Mississippi and the evening worship service of Safe Harbor Family Church in Flowood.



The choir at Safe Harbor

Safe Harbor's worship also had music as its theme – it was their annual Christmas cantata, and for this year the piece chosen (Changed by a Baby Boy) featured a mix of musical genre performed by the Safe Harbor choir, with numerous solo voices featured. My role came at toward the end of when we shared the special service for marking the ending of a ministry from the UCC Book of Worship ... in this case the retirement of Pam Walsh as Senior Pastor after serving Safe Harbor for the past seventeen years, followed by a surprise commissioning ceremony. The impetus for this came as a request from Safe Harbor wondering if there were some way for the conference to recognize Pam, her history of ministry, and her long unfulfilled dream of ordination.

At their November 16, 2013 meeting the members of COM responded to this request by deciding upon the status of commissioned minister. Pam's ministry had been combined over the seventeen years with her full time work as an oncology nurse, so her dream to work for ordination through the alternate path to ministry was not realistic for her. So COM suggested requesting statements from members of Safe Harbor Church as testimonies of Pam's skills in pastoral care – testimonies that with Pam's education and ministerial service would qualify her for commissioning. Five members wrote splendid testimonies.

These members were the only ones who knew what was being planned, and they managed to keep those plans a secret. On the evening of the service, I explained what a commissioned minister means in the UCC and that COM had voted to honor Pam's seventeen years of fine pastoral service by commissioning her as a minister of pastoral care. Pam expressed that she was thrilled and honored, as well as surprised. Church members were also very pleased... at honoring Pam in this way and for the fact that it had been a surprise enjoyed by all! This spirit filled action helps bind us closer with this newly affiliated, growing, active congregation that is geographically far away from the majority of our other congregations.



The Leadership Team at RIM

Our final church visit marked the beginning of the New Year with worship at Restoration Inclusive Ministries in Decatur. Once again the welcome we received was warm and the music moving. When asked to share a few words I noted that when in college I was a middle distance runner who ran on the average twelve miles each day. Out of that experience I felt confident that the Praise Music leader for RIM was in better shape than I had been in my younger years since active movement is at the heart of his musical direction! It was also my pleasure to congratulate RIM on behalf of the SECUCC as recent recipients of a National UCC grant given to new and renewing congregations and of a Neighbors Need Grant for their multi-year project to address the issue of HIV among the LGBTQ community in Atlanta. These announcements drew great applause... as much as had marked the music earlier! And Pastor Sonya William's sermon on pearls of great price reminded all of us that we are all precious in God's sight.



Rev. Sonya Williams with Randy

Wonderful music, good worship, warm welcome, and strong social witness – all means for growing the Church and for launching a New Year! May such gifts mark your church experience in the coming days as well, and may God bless you and yours.

SHALOM – Randy Hyvonen

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